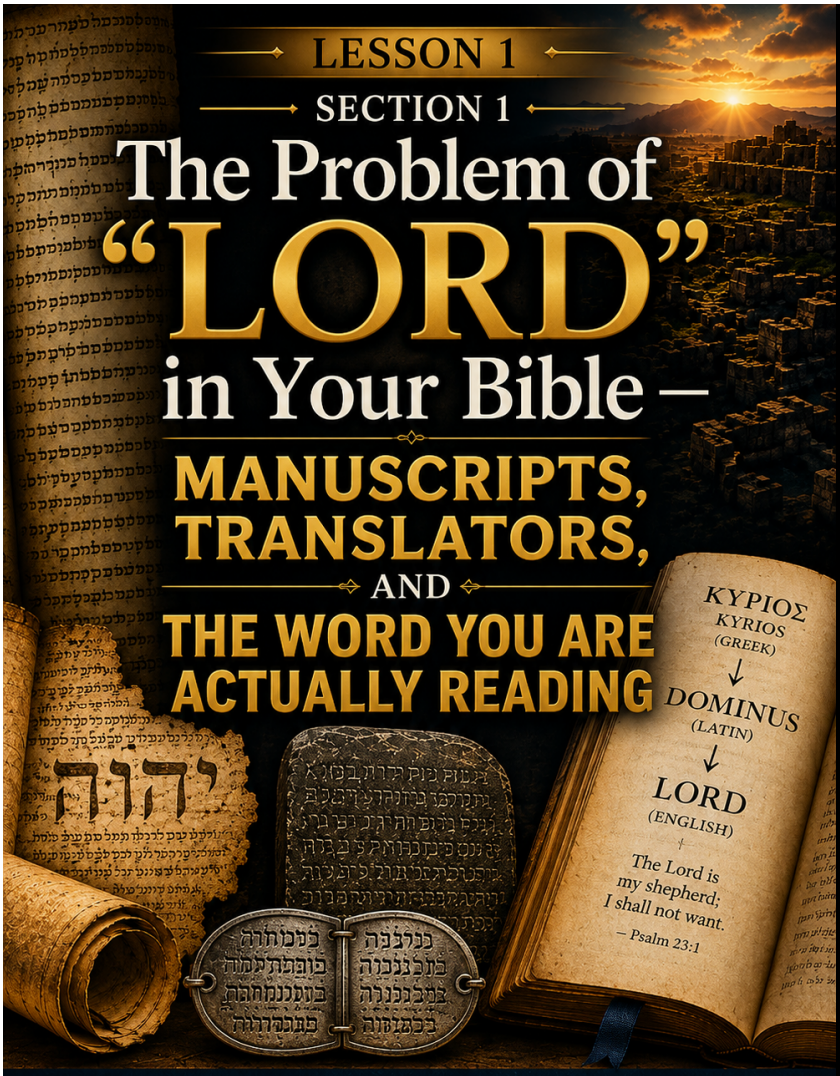
LESSON 1

SECTION 1

The Problem of "LORD" in Your Bible —

MANUSCRIPTS, TRANSLATORS, AND THE WORD YOU ARE ACTUALLY READING



FROM HEBREW TO GREEK

FROM GREEK TO LATIN

FROM LATIN TO ENGLISH

WHAT THE MANUSCRIPTS PRESERVE — AND WHAT THEY DO NOT

HTO PUBLISHING

Lesson 1
SECTION 1 The Problem of "LORD" in Your Bible — Manuscripts, Translators, and the Word You Are Actually Reading

HTO Publishing 2026

"Search the Scriptures *(study them carefully, examine the evidence, and test what they reveal)*, **for they are the very writings that testify concerning Me."**
— The Khristos (John 5:39, amplified study paraphrase)

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Lesson 1 – Analyzing the Evidence
Section 1 – The Problem of "LORD" in Your Bible: Manuscripts, Translators, and the Word You Are Actually Reading

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Publisher's Statement

HTO Publishing is dedicated to producing educational resources that encourage careful study of biblical manuscripts, ancient languages, archaeology, and historical evidence. Our mission is to promote thoughtful investigation by distinguishing documented evidence from historical interpretation and by encouraging readers to examine primary sources with intellectual honesty and scholarly rigor.

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Lesson Overview

Every reader of the Bible encounters the word **LORD**, yet few pause to ask how that word arrived in the text. Is it the Creator's original self-designation, a translation, a title, or the result of centuries of manuscript transmission and translation decisions?

This lesson introduces students to the historical and manuscript evidence surrounding the divine designation found in the Hebrew Scriptures. Rather than beginning with theological assumptions, students will examine the surviving archaeological discoveries, ancient manuscripts, inscriptions, and translation traditions to distinguish **documented evidence** from **historical inference**.

Throughout this lesson, we will trace the transmission of the biblical text from ancient Hebrew manuscripts through the Greek Septuagint, the Latin Vulgate, and finally into modern English Bibles. We will also examine important archaeological discoveries—including the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Ketef Hinnom Amulets, the Mesha Stele, the Lachish Letters, and the Elephantine Papyri—to determine what these sources actually preserve and what they do not.

Special attention will be given to the chronological gap between the traditional lifetime of Moses and the earliest surviving epigraphic evidence, as well as the linguistic question of what language Moses may have used if he recorded the revelation described in Exodus 3:14–15.

The goal of this lesson is not to persuade readers toward a particular pronunciation or theological position, but to equip them with the historical tools necessary to evaluate the evidence carefully, distinguish observation from interpretation, and recognize the limits

of what surviving manuscripts can establish.

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this lesson, students should be able to:

- Explain how the Hebrew Scriptures were transmitted from ancient manuscripts into Greek, Latin, and English.
- Distinguish between **direct manuscript evidence** and **historical interpretation**.
- Describe the roles of the Septuagint, the Latin Vulgate, and English translations in transmitting the word **LORD**.
- Identify the major archaeological discoveries related to the divine designation, including:
  - The Dead Sea Scrolls
  - The Ketef Hinnom Amulets
  - The Mesha Stele
  - The Lachish Letters
  - The Elephantine Papyri
- Evaluate what each archaeological source explicitly states versus what historians infer from it.
- Explain why the chronological gap between Moses and the earliest surviving inscriptions is historically significant.
- Describe the development of the Masoretic vocalization system and its relationship to the Hebrew consonantal text.
- Explain why the medieval form **"Jehovah"** is understood as a later linguistic development.
- Discuss why the original language in which Moses may have recorded the Exodus account cannot be established from the

surviving evidence.

- Explain why the available manuscript and archaeological evidence does not establish the original spelling or pronunciation of the designation revealed in Exodus 3:14–15.
- Apply sound historical methodology by separating evidence, inference, and conclusion.

Key Vocabulary

Adonai — A Hebrew title meaning "Lord" or "My Lord," used in Jewish reading tradition.

Archaeology — The study of past civilizations through their material remains, including inscriptions, monuments, and artifacts.

Biblical Hebrew — The form of Hebrew preserved in the manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible.

Consonantal Text — A writing system that records primarily consonants, without original vowel markings.

Dead Sea Scrolls — Ancient Jewish manuscripts dating from approximately the third century BCE to the first century CE, discovered near Qumran.

Dominus — The Latin word meaning "Lord," used in the Latin Vulgate.

Elephantine Papyri — Fifth-century BCE Aramaic documents discovered at Elephantine in Egypt.

Epigraphy — The study of ancient inscriptions engraved on durable materials such as stone, metal, or pottery.

Historical Inference — A conclusion drawn from available evidence rather than explicitly stated by the evidence itself.

Ketef Hinnom Amulets — Two silver scrolls discovered near

Jerusalem containing an early form of the priestly blessing.

Kyrios — The Greek word meaning "Lord," commonly found in surviving Greek biblical manuscripts.

Lachish Letters — Hebrew military correspondence dating to the late Kingdom of Judah.

Manuscript — A handwritten copy of a document produced before the invention of printing.

Masoretes — Jewish scribes who preserved and standardized the Hebrew biblical text and added the vowel-pointing system between the seventh and tenth centuries CE.

Mesha Stele — A ninth-century BCE Moabite inscription commissioned by King Mesha describing his conflict with Israel.

Observation — A conclusion based directly on what a manuscript, inscription, or artifact explicitly preserves.

Paleo-Hebrew — The earlier form of the Hebrew script used before the adoption of the square Aramaic script.

Septuagint (LXX) — The ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Tetragrammaton — The four Hebrew consonants יהוה preserved in the Hebrew biblical text.

Translation Tradition — The historical process by which texts are translated and transmitted from one language to another over time.

Vowel Points (Niqqud) — The system of vowel markings added to the Hebrew consonantal text by the Masoretes to guide pronunciation.

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“The reader is not reading the Creator's own Name. The reader is reading a translator's decision, made on their behalf, often without their awareness, the end result of a chain of human choices — scribal, oral, editorial, and linguistic — that stretches across more than two thousand years. Understanding this chain is not merely an academic exercise; it is the foundational

prerequisite for evaluating every claim made about the Tetragrammaton's status as the divine Name. (p.4)

Student Lesson Guide: How Kyrios, Dominus, and Lord Entered Scripture

△ Lesson Overview

This lesson will help you understand how three important words — **Kyrios**, **Dominus**, and **Lord** — appear in the biblical text through a long chain of translation decisions.
You will learn what the manuscripts actually show, what they *do not* preserve, and how English inherited a series of terms whose origins cannot always be determined with certainty.

1. The Greek Stage: What the Manuscripts Actually Show

Greek Stage
When ancient Hebrew texts were translated into Greek, the Greek manuscripts that survive today show the term **Kyrios**, meaning "master" or "ruler."
However, the Greek translators did **not** preserve or record whatever term may have appeared in the Hebrew source.
Because the original designation is not transmitted, we cannot determine whether **Kyrios** represents a **substitution** or the **original term** used by the translators.

What you should understand

- Kyrios is the **term that appears** in the Greek manuscripts.
- We cannot verify whether Kyrios is a **replacement** or the **original choice** of the translators.
- The Greek stage gives us **evidence of usage**, not evidence of origin.

2. The Latin Shift: Kyrios → Dominus

Latin Shift
When Scripture was translated from Greek into Latin, Jerome rendered **Kyrios** as **Dominus**, a Latin word meaning "master" or "lord."
Jerome noted that older Greek manuscripts still contained Hebrew characters representing a divine designation, but he continued using the Greek term that appeared in the manuscripts available to him.

What you should understand

- Dominus is the Latin term used where Greek manuscripts show Kyrios.
- Jerome followed the Greek textual tradition rather than restoring an earlier term.
- This creates the link: **Kyrios → Dominus**, based on manuscript evidence.

3. The English Shift: Dominus → Lord

English Shift

When Scripture entered English, translators needed a word that matched the meaning of Dominus.
They chose **Lord**, a word originally meaning **hlāfweard** — "loaf-guardian," the keeper of the household bread.
Over time, Lord became a term for a feudal superior or master.

Because Lord matched the social meaning of Dominus, translators such as Wycliffe and Tyndale used it consistently.
Their choices shaped all later English translations.

What you should understand

- Lord originally meant **bread-guardian**, not a divine title.
- English translators matched **meaning**, not origin.
- This creates the link: **Dominus → Lord**.

4. English Standardization: One Word for Many Ancient Terms

English Standardization
The King James translators (1611) standardized the tradition by using:

- **Lord** for Kyrios
- **Lord** for Dominus
- **Lord** for Adonai
- **LORD** (small caps) for an unrecoverable Hebrew designation

This means English uses **one term** for several different ancient concepts, even though their origins and relationships are not always clear.

What you should understand

- English collapses multiple ancient terms into **one word**.
- LORD (small caps) signals an **unrecoverable Hebrew designation**.
- English preserves **usage**, not original identity.

5. Lesson Reflection

Reflection Prompt
In your own words, explain how the chain **Kyrios → Dominus → Lord** shows the way translation traditions shape the Scriptures we read today.
Focus on what is preserved, what is lost, and what cannot be determined from the manuscripts.

What we can conclude:

“This rendering is not a translation in any strict linguistic sense. "LORD" is not the English meaning of YHWH. Scholars do not know, with certainty, what YHWH means — its etymology remains disputed, with proposals ranging from a causative form of the verb "to be" (meaning "He causes to be" or "He who brings into existence") to a shortened liturgical form of an older divine name.”

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“In the Masoretic Text, the Tetragrammaton appears approximately 6,828 times across the Hebrew Bible. This is the source of the frequently cited "6,800+ occurrences" argument advanced by advocates of the Tetragrammaton's centrality and authenticity. In the Septuagint, however, those same locations overwhelmingly contain not the Tetragrammaton but the Greek word "Kyrios" — meaning Lord, Master, or Ruler. The vast majority of surviving Septuagint manuscripts do not contain the Hebrew letters or any Hebrew equivalent at those points in the text. (p.6)”

Several ancient manuscripts show the Tetragrammaton (the divine name YHWH) in various forms, especially in early Hebrew and some Greek texts. Notably:

- **Papyrus Fouad 266** (1st century BCE) — This is a Greek Septuagint manuscript fragment that uniquely preserves the Tetragrammaton in Hebrew square script (יהוה) within the

Greek text, rather than substituting it with the Greek word "Kyrios" (Lord). It is one of the oldest known Septuagint manuscripts to do so.

Hebrew Masoretic Text Manuscripts — These preserve the Tetragrammaton throughout the Hebrew Bible, appearing approximately 6,800 times.

Some **Dead Sea Scrolls** fragments also show the Tetragrammaton in paleo-Hebrew script, even within texts otherwise written in Aramaic or Hebrew.

Here are the principal renderings found among the Dead Sea Scrolls:

יהוה (the Tetragrammaton) — The four Hebrew consonants appear in many scrolls.

Paleo-Hebrew יהוה — Some scribes wrote the four letters in the older Paleo-Hebrew script while the surrounding text was written in the later square Aramaic script. This appears to have marked the divine designation as special.

Four dots (••••) — In some manuscripts, four dots are used in place of the Tetragrammaton, apparently as a scribal substitute.

אל (El) — "God." This is a title and appears in various contexts.

אלהים (Elohim) — "God." This is another title used throughout the scrolls.

אדני (Adonai) — "Lord" or "My Lord." This also appears in the scrolls, although much less frequently than Elohim.

אלוה (Eloah) — The singular form of "God" appears in some texts.

What the Dead Sea Scrolls do not show

The scrolls do **not** preserve:

- A pronunciation of יהוה.

- Vowel points indicating how it was spoken.
- A statement explaining what the four letters were pronounced as.
- A manuscript saying, "This four-letter sequence is pronounced..."

An important observation

The Dead Sea Scrolls demonstrate that, during the Second Temple period, there was **not a single uniform scribal practice** for representing the divine designation. Different manuscripts use different conventions:

- Writing יהוה in the normal script.
- Writing it in Paleo-Hebrew.
- Replacing it with four dots.
- Using titles such as **El**, **Elohim**, or **Adonai**, depending on the manuscript and context.

This diversity shows that ancient scribes employed multiple methods for referring to the Creator. However, it does **not** by itself establish the original pronunciation or prove that one particular rendering was the original name revealed to Moses. Instead, it provides evidence of varied textual and scribal practices during the Second Temple period.

- Other early Greek manuscripts of the Septuagint mostly replace the Tetragrammaton with "Kyrios," but a few fragments, especially from the 2nd century BCE to 1st century BCE, show the divine name in paleo-Hebrew or square Hebrew letters embedded in the Greek text.

Epigraphic evidence supporting the Tetragrammaton and its connection to Israel includes several key inscriptions and artifacts:

- **The Ketef Hinnom Amulets (7th century BCE)** — These silver scrolls contain the divine name YHWH in paleo-Hebrew script and are among the oldest known artifacts bearing the

Tetragrammaton. They demonstrate the use of the divine name in Israelite religious practice.

This is an important distinction. The **Ketef Hinnom Amulets** do **not** independently prove a connection to "Israel" in the sense of identifying the people or establishing their ethnic identity. Rather, the connection is inferred from their archaeological context and the text they contain.

A more careful presentation would be:

What the Ketef Hinnom Amulets Show

- Two silver amulets discovered in a burial complex at **Ketef Hinnom**, near Jerusalem.
- They are generally dated to the **late 7th or early 6th century BCE**.
- They contain a version of the **priestly blessing** found in Numbers 6:24–26.
- The inscriptions include the four Hebrew consonants יהוה (the Tetragrammaton).

What They Do Not Show

- They do **not** identify the four consonants as "the personal name of the Creator."
- They do **not** explain the pronunciation.
- They do **not** define the meaning of the four letters.
- They do **not** state that the wearer or owner was an Israelite.
- They do **not** independently establish that the four letters originated with Moses or Exodus 3.

How Are They Connected to Israel?

The connection is based on **historical context**, not on an explicit

statement in the amulets themselves.

Scholars connect them with ancient Judah/Israel because:

- They were discovered in **Jerusalem**, a city associated with the Kingdom of Judah.
- The wording closely parallels the priestly blessing preserved in the Hebrew Bible.
- The script is consistent with Hebrew writing of that period.
- The archaeological context places them within the culture generally identified as Judahite.

These observations provide evidence that the amulets belonged to the religious and literary tradition associated with ancient Judah. However, **this is an interpretation based on converging archaeological, linguistic, and textual evidence**, not something the inscriptions explicitly declare.

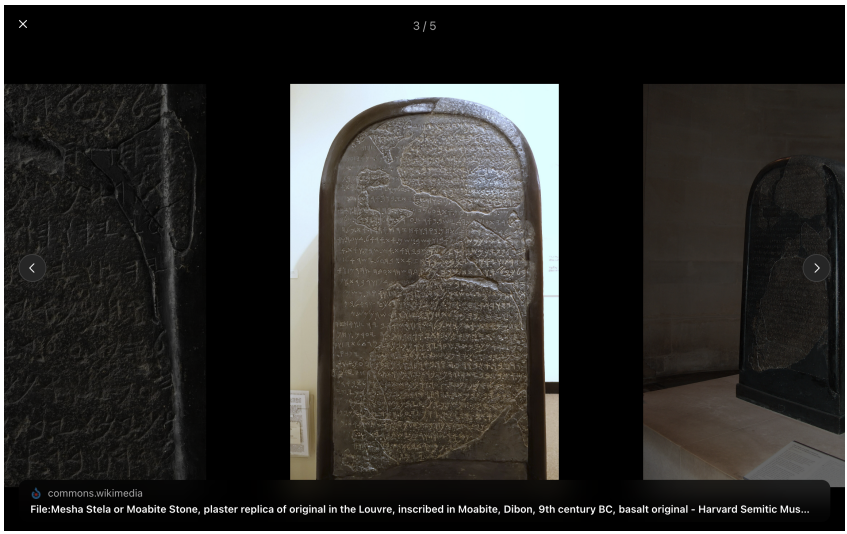
Historically Precise Conclusion

A more accurate statement would be:

The Ketef Hinnom Amulets preserve the four Hebrew consonants יהוה within a text closely related to the priestly blessing of Numbers 6:24–26. Found in a late 7th-century BCE burial context near Jerusalem, they provide evidence that these consonants were in use within the Judahite literary and religious tradition of that period. However, the inscriptions themselves do not explain the meaning, pronunciation, or theological significance of the four consonants, nor do they independently establish their origin or identify them as the personal name revealed to Moses.

This wording clearly distinguishes **what the amulets actually preserve** from **the historical conclusions scholars draw from their context**.

- **The Siloam Inscription (8th century BCE)** — While not directly containing the Tetragrammaton, this inscription from Jerusalem is part of the broader epigraphic context of ancient Israel and its language environment.
- **The Mesha Stele (9th century BCE)** — An inscription by King Mesha of Moab references the Israelite god YHWH, showing recognition of the divine name outside Israel and confirming its use in the region.[OBJ]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commons.wikimedia
File:Mesha Stela or Moabite Stone, plaster replica of original in the Louvre, inscribed in Moabite, Dibon, 9th century BC, basalt original - Harvard Semitic Mus...

A more historically cautious treatment would distinguish between **what the Mesha Stele explicitly states** and **what historians infer from it**.

The Mesha Stele: What It Shows—and What It Does Not

The **Mesha Stele** (also called the Moabite Stone), dating to approximately the **9th century BCE**, is one of the earliest extra-biblical inscriptions mentioning the four Hebrew consonants commonly read as יהוה **(YHWH)**. It is frequently cited as evidence for the antiquity of the Tetragrammaton. However, several important

distinctions should be made.

What the Stele Shows

- The inscription contains the four consonants יהוה.
- The inscription was commissioned by **King Mesha of Moab**, not by an Israelite scribe.
- It refers to these consonants in the context of Mesha's conflict with Israel.
- It demonstrates that this four-letter designation was known in the region during the 9th century BCE.

Why This Is Not Conclusive

The Mesha Stele **does not** state:

- that יהוה is the personal Name revealed to Moses.
- how the four consonants were pronounced.
- what the four consonants mean.
- that the inscription is quoting Exodus 3:14–15.
- that the four consonants originated with Moses.
- that they represent the Creator's original self-designation.

Furthermore:

- The interpretation that יהוה refers to the God of Israel is based on the historical context of the inscription and comparison with biblical and other Northwest Semitic texts.
- The stele itself does not explain or define the four consonants.
- It provides evidence that these consonants were recognized in the region during the 9th century BCE, but it does not independently establish their origin, theological significance, or original pronunciation.

Historically Precise Conclusion

The Mesha Stele demonstrates that the four Hebrew consonants יהוה were known in the southern Levant during the 9th century BCE and were associated with Israel in the context of Mesha's inscription. However, the inscription does not identify these consonants as the original Name revealed to Moses, explain their meaning, preserve their pronunciation, or establish their origin. Those conclusions depend on historical interpretation and comparison with other sources rather than on statements made by the stele itself.

This distinction is essential because **the inscription is evidence that the consonants were in use**, but it is **not independent proof of what those consonants originally represented or how they were understood at the time of Moses**.

- **The Tel Dan Stele (9th–8th century BCE)** — This Aramaic inscription mentions the "House of David" and refers to YHWH, linking the divine name to the Israelite monarchy and territory.

The Tel Dan Stele does not explicitly refer to the Tetragrammaton (YHWH) by name. Instead, it is famous for mentioning the "House of David" (Hebrew: בית דוד, byt dwd), which is the earliest known extra-biblical reference to King David's dynasty. The inscription is an Aramaic victory stele from the 9th century BCE, attributed to an Aramean king, likely Hazael, boasting of victories over the kings of Israel and Judah.

While the stele references the "king of Israel" and the "king of the House of David," it does not directly mention the divine name YHWH. The connection to Israel is through the political and dynastic references rather than a direct epigraphic mention of the Tetragrammaton.

So, the Tel Dan Stele supports the historical existence of the Davidic dynasty and Israelite kingship but does not contain the Tetragrammaton itself.

- **The Lachish Letters (6th century BCE)** — These ostraca from Judah include references to YHWH, confirming the name's use in official correspondence.

You're right to distinguish between **what the Lachish Letters actually say** and **what scholars infer from them**.

The **Lachish Letters** (late 7th–early 6th century BCE, just before the Babylonian destruction of Judah) contain the sequence of Hebrew consonants commonly transcribed as יהוה **(YHWH)** in several greetings, such as a blessing often translated:

"May YHWH cause my lord to hear good news..."

However, there are important points to keep separate:

- **The letters preserve consonants only.**
  - Ancient Hebrew manuscripts of this period generally did not record vowels.
  - The inscriptions contain the four consonants **YHWH**, not a pronunciation.
- **The letters do not explain what those four letters mean.**
  - They do not identify them as "the personal name of God."
  - They do not define or interpret the sequence.
- **The identification of those four consonants as the divine name is based on scholarly interpretation.**
  - This interpretation is supported by comparison with many other Hebrew inscriptions and biblical manuscripts where the same four consonants occur in similar religious contexts.
  - It is not because the Lachish Letters themselves say, "These letters are the divine name."

- **The letters do not prove pronunciation.**
    - They do not confirm "Yahweh."
    - They do not confirm "Jehovah."
    - They do not confirm any other vocalization.

So, if by "confirm YHWH" you mean **confirm that the pronunciation was "Yahweh" or that the letters unquestionably represented a specific divine name**, then no—the Lachish Letters do not do that on their own.

If, however, one simply means **they contain the consonantal sequence** יהוה, then that is what the inscriptions visibly preserve. From there, scholars interpret the sequence in light of broader epigraphic and textual evidence.

The key distinction is between:

- **Observation:** The inscriptions contain the consonants יהוה.
- **Interpretation:** Those consonants represent the divine name later reconstructed as "Yahweh."

Those are related but not identical claims. Keeping that distinction clear is important when evaluating the evidence.

- **The Elephantine Papyri (5th century BCE)** — Jewish military colony documents from Elephantine in Egypt contain references to YHWH, showing the name's use among Israelite communities in the diaspora.

The Elephantine Papyri are an important source, but it's helpful to separate **what they demonstrate directly** from **what historians infer**.

OBJ

OBJ

This ancient document is a famous text from the Elephantine Papyri, specifically a letter written in imperial **Aramaic** during the late 5th century

OBJ

Elephantine Island is a historic island in the

River Nile, located next to the city of Aswan in Upper Egypt

OBJ

OBJ

Elephantine is an ancient island and archaeological site located in the Nile River adjacent to the city of Aswan in southern Egypt

What are the Elephantine Papyri?

The Elephantine Papyri are a collection of Aramaic papyrus documents dating primarily to the **5th century BCE** from the island of Elephantine (near modern Aswan in southern Egypt). They include:

- Personal letters
- Legal contracts
- Marriage documents
- Petitions

- Religious correspondence

They were written by a military colony living under the Persian Empire.

Do they prove the community was connected to the House of Jacob?

They provide **strong evidence**, but not absolute proof in the modern sense.

The documents indicate that the community:

- Observed Passover (one papyrus contains instructions concerning Passover).
- Had priests.
- Maintained a temple dedicated to their national deity.
- Used Hebrew/Israelite personal names.
- Corresponded with authorities in Jerusalem and Samaria regarding rebuilding their temple.

These points strongly suggest the community identified with the people descended from the House of Jacob.

However:

- The papyri never say, "We are descendants of Jacob."
- They do not provide genealogies tracing every member back to the biblical patriarchs.
- Their identity is reconstructed from multiple pieces of evidence.

So the connection is historical and cumulative rather than explicitly stated.

Do the papyri confirm the divine Name?

This depends on what is meant by "confirm."

They do preserve a written form.

The Aramaic documents contain the letters:

יהו

often transliterated **YHW**.

Some documents also contain names incorporating this element.

But they do not explain the Name.

The papyri do **not** say:

- "YHW is the Creator."
- "YHW is pronounced ____."
- "This is the sacred Name revealed to Moses."

They simply use the letters as part of the community's religious language.

Therefore, they do **not** confirm:

- the pronunciation,
- the etymology,
- or the theological meaning of the sequence.

Those are scholarly conclusions drawn by comparing the papyri with biblical manuscripts and other inscriptions.

Why do scholars connect YHW with the biblical יהוה?

Several reasons are commonly given:

- The community worshiped the same national deity as Judeans.

- They celebrated Passover.
- They appealed to Jerusalem's priesthood.
- The shorter spelling **YHW** also appears in many Hebrew personal names (for example, names ending in **-yahu**).

Because of this broader context, most historians conclude that **YHW** in Elephantine is a shortened form referring to the same deity represented elsewhere by יהוה.

However, this remains an interpretation based on converging evidence rather than a statement made by the papyri themselves.

What can be said with confidence?

The Elephantine Papyri **do show**:

- A 5th-century BCE Aramaic-speaking community in Egypt.
- A temple dedicated to **YHW**.
- Observance of Israelite religious practices such as Passover.
- Communication with Jerusalem and Samaria.

They **do not show**:

- How **YHW** was pronounced.
- An explanation of what the letters mean.
- **A declaration that "YHW is the four-letter Name revealed to Moses."**
- Proof that every member of the community descended biologically from the House of Jacob.

So, like the Lachish Letters, the Elephantine Papyri preserve valuable historical evidence, but the identification of **YHW** with the biblical יהוה is a historical inference supported by multiple lines of evidence, not something the papyri explicitly state themselves.

- **Dead Sea Scrolls (3rd century BCE – 1st century CE)** — Several scrolls preserve the Tetragrammaton in paleo-Hebrew script even within texts otherwise written in Aramaic or Hebrew, underscoring its sacred status.

Conclusion: This is one of the central historical questions in evaluating claims about Exodus 3:14–15. Regardless of one's theological conclusions, there is a substantial chronological gap between the traditional lifetime of Moses and the earliest surviving inscriptions containing the consonants associated with the Tetragrammaton.

1. Traditional date for Moses

There is no scholarly consensus regarding the date of Moses.

The two most common proposals are:

- **Early Exodus model:** approximately **1446 BCE**, placing Moses in the **15th century BCE**.
- **Late Exodus model:** approximately **1270–1250 BCE**, placing Moses in the **13th century BCE** during the reign of Ramesses II.

Some historians question whether Moses can be dated historically at all because there are no contemporary Egyptian inscriptions that explicitly mention him.

Nevertheless, even using the later (13th-century) model provides a useful comparison.

2. What Exodus 3:14–15 claims

According to the biblical narrative, Moses receives a revelation at the burning bush.

Verse 15 presents this revelation as something to be remembered:

"...this is my name forever..."

Whether one understands this as a literal divine name, a title, or a theological declaration, the narrative places this event during Moses' lifetime.

3. Earliest surviving epigraphic evidence

The earliest inscriptions commonly discussed are:

Evidence	Approximate date	Contains
Egyptian inscription referring to the Shasu of Yhw	c. 1400–1200 BCE	Yhw (place or people; interpretation debated)
Kuntillet Ajrud	c. 800 BCE	יהוה
Khirbet el-Qom	c. 750 BCE	יהוה
Mesha Stele	c. 840 BCE	יהוה
Lachish Letters	c. 590 BCE	יהוה
Elephantine Papyri	c. 450 BCE	יהו (YHW)

4. The important chronological gap

If Moses lived:

15th century BCE

then the first undisputed inscriptions containing יהוה appear roughly:

600–700 years later

If Moses lived:

13th century BCE

the gap is still approximately:

400–500 years

before the earliest widely accepted epigraphic occurrences of יהוה.

5. What about the Shasu of Yhw?

Some scholars cite the Egyptian references to the **Shasu of Yhw** as narrowing the gap.

However, caution is warranted.

The inscription merely records something transcribed as **Yhw**.

It does **not** state:

- this is the God of Moses,
- this is the divine name,
- this refers to Exodus,
- this is the same as the later Hebrew יהוה.

Indeed, there is ongoing scholarly debate over whether **Yhw** refers to:

- a geographical region,
- a tribal designation,
- a sanctuary,
- or a deity associated with that region.

Thus, while the inscription is historically significant, it does not independently establish the biblical claim.

6. The historical implication

From a historical standpoint, there is a significant evidentiary gap.

We possess:

- no surviving inscription from Moses' lifetime quoting Exodus 3,
- no manuscript from the Late Bronze Age preserving Exodus 3,
- no contemporaneous monument stating that Moses received the four-letter Name.

Instead, the earliest surviving evidence comes centuries after the period in which Moses is traditionally placed.

That does **not** prove the Exodus account is false. Absence of earlier surviving evidence is not evidence of nonexistence. Many ancient texts and inscriptions have been lost. However, it also means historians cannot say that archaeology independently verifies the Exodus 3 revelation as it is narrated.

7. A balanced historical conclusion

From the standpoint of historical methodology:

- The biblical narrative places the revelation of the Name during Moses' lifetime (traditionally 15th or 13th century BCE).
- The earliest surviving inscriptions that clearly contain יהוה date several centuries later.
- The **Shasu of Yhw** inscription is earlier but does not explicitly identify **Yhw** as the divine Name revealed to Moses.
- Therefore, archaeology currently **does not bridge the chronological gap** between the narrative setting of Exodus 3 and the earliest unambiguous epigraphic occurrences of יהוה.

This distinction is important: the biblical claim and the archaeological evidence are related, but they are not the same type of evidence. The former is a literary and theological claim preserved in later manuscripts, while the latter consists of inscriptions whose interpretation depends on historical context and comparison with other sources.

- The original Hebrew Bible was written with **consonants only**; no vowel points existed in the earliest manuscripts.
- The **Masoretes (7th–10th centuries CE)** added vowel points (nikudot) more than **1,000 years after the time of Moses**.
- For the **Tetragrammaton (יהוה)**, the Masoretes **did not preserve an original pronunciation**; they inserted the vowels of **Adonai** (or **Elohim** in certain contexts) as a reading cue.
- This voweling system reminded readers to **say the substitute title**, not to pronounce the four consonants.
- The form **"Jehovah"** arose when a medieval Christian scholar mistakenly combined the consonants **YHWH** with the vowels of **Adonai**.
- **"Jehovah" has no attestation in any known ancient manuscript, inscription, or historical source** and is therefore considered a later hybrid form.
- In most English Bibles, **"LORD"** represents a series of historical and editorial decisions rather than a preserved original pronunciation.
- Those decisions include:
    - Using the Tetragrammaton in a particular manuscript tradition.
    - Following the oral custom of substituting **Adonai** for the written consonants.
    - The Masoretes adding substitute vowels to the consonantal text.
    - Translators rendering the substitution as **"LORD"** in English.
    - The later influence of the unattested hybrid form **"Jehovah."**

Consequently, **no surviving manuscript preserves the Creator's**

own spoken pronunciation of the Name; what survives reflects successive layers of human transmission and editorial practice.

This observation forms the paper's central premise: **references to "the LORD" in biblical translations should be understood through the lens of this historical process of textual transmission and human mediation.**

You're right to separate **what the manuscripts preserve** from **what is inferred**. Here's a version that avoids stating assumptions as facts.

Stage	Rendering	What the Evidence Shows	What Remains Unknown
Original Revelation (Exodus 3:14–15)	**Unknown**	The biblical narrative records that Moses received a revelation concerning the Creator.	No surviving manuscript or inscription from Moses' lifetime preserves the original spoken form.
Hebrew Consonantal Tradition	יהוה	Later Hebrew manuscripts preserve these four consonants.	The original vowels, pronunciation, and intended spoken form are not preserved.
Hebrew Reading Tradition	**Adonai ("Lord")**	By the Second Temple period, Jewish readers commonly read **Adonai** when encountering יהוה in the text.	The surviving evidence does not establish when this practice began or what, if anything, it replaced.
Greek Translation	**κύριος (Kyrios, "Lord")**	Most surviving Greek manuscripts use the Greek title	The manuscripts do **not** explain what **Kyrios** replaced. They

		Kyrios. Some early Greek manuscripts instead preserve the Hebrew divine designation in Hebrew characters.	do not state whether it represents a personal name, a title, or another Hebrew expression.
Latin Translation	**Dominus ("Lord")**	The Latin tradition commonly uses **Dominus**, the Latin word for "Lord."	It does not preserve or explain the original Hebrew pronunciation or designation.
English Translation	**LORD**	English translators commonly print **LORD** (small capitals). The English word **lord** comes from Old English **hlāford**, originally meaning **"loaf-guardian"** or **"keeper of the bread,"** later "master" or "ruler."	**LORD** is an English title and does not preserve the original Hebrew pronunciation.
Medieval Form	**Jehovah**	A medieval form created by combining the consonants יהוה with later Masoretic vowel points.	No known ancient Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Egyptian, or other ancient source attests **Jehovah** as an

ancient pronunciation.

Documented Transmission

Unknown original spoken designation
⬇
Hebrew manuscripts: יהוה (consonants only)
⬇
Hebrew reading tradition: Adonai ("Lord")
⬇
Greek manuscripts: Kyrios ("Lord")
⬇
Latin manuscripts: Dominus ("Lord")
⬇
English translations: LORD (Old English *hlāford*)

Evidence-Based Summary

- The earliest Hebrew manuscripts preserve **consonants**, not the original pronunciation.
- The Hebrew reading tradition uses **Adonai**, but the surviving evidence does not establish what this reading replaced.
- Most surviving Greek manuscripts use **Kyrios**, but **they do not explain what Kyrios represents in the underlying Hebrew**.
- The Latin **Dominus** and English **LORD** continue the use of a title rather than providing the original spoken form.
- Based on the surviving manuscript evidence alone, **the original pronunciation and the precise designation underlying the later translation tradition remain unknown**.

A Fundamental Linguistic Consideration

A foundational principle of historical research is that conclusions should be grounded in evidence rather than assumptions. For this reason, we cannot simply assume that the original language in which the revelation of Exodus 3:14–15 was first recorded was the

standardized form of Biblical Hebrew preserved in later manuscripts.

The earliest surviving manuscripts containing Exodus were copied many centuries after the period traditionally associated with Moses. Although these manuscripts preserve the account in Biblical Hebrew, they do not demonstrate that this was the original language or script in which the revelation was first written.

According to the biblical narrative, Moses was raised in the Egyptian royal court, where he would have received an education in the language and writing system of Egypt. The same narrative also states that he spent approximately forty years in Midian, where Northwest Semitic languages were likely spoken. However, the surviving historical and manuscript evidence does not identify the language or script Moses, if he recorded the event himself, would have used.

Consequently, it is historically unwarranted to assert that the original revelation of Exodus 3:14–15 was first written in the standardized form of Biblical Hebrew preserved in later manuscripts. The extant Hebrew manuscripts testify to the language of the surviving textual tradition, but they do not establish the language of the original record.

Accordingly, the most historically responsible conclusion is that **the original language and script of the Exodus revelation remain unknown**. Any claim that the revelation was originally recorded in Biblical Hebrew extends beyond what the surviving manuscript evidence can presently demonstrate.

Conclusion

This uncertainty has an important implication. **If we do not know the language or script in which Moses originally recorded the revelation, then we likewise cannot determine with historical certainty the original spelling or pronunciation of the designation revealed in Exodus 3:14–15.** Any proposed spelling or vocalization necessarily depends on later manuscript traditions, linguistic reconstruction, or historical inference rather than on a surviving original document. Therefore, from the standpoint of the available historical and manuscript evidence alone, **the original**

linguistic form—including both the spelling and the pronunciation—cannot be established with certainty.

Lesson Summary

Key Takeaways

Discussion Questions

Review Questions

Key Takeaways

By the end of this lesson, students should understand the following foundational principles:

- **Evidence and interpretation are not the same.** Ancient manuscripts and archaeological discoveries preserve valuable historical data, but historians often draw conclusions that extend beyond what the sources explicitly state.
- **The word "LORD" in modern English Bibles is the result of a long history of textual transmission and translation.** It reflects centuries of manuscript copying, translation, and editorial decisions rather than a direct preservation of the original spoken designation.
- **The Hebrew Scriptures were transmitted through multiple languages.** The surviving textual tradition includes Hebrew manuscripts, Greek translations, Latin translations, and English translations, each representing a different stage in the transmission of the biblical text.
- **Ancient archaeological discoveries preserve important evidence, but each has limitations.** The Dead Sea Scrolls, Ketef Hinnom Amulets, Mesha Stele, Lachish Letters, and Elephantine Papyri each contribute valuable information, yet

none independently establishes the original spelling, pronunciation, or meaning of the designation revealed in Exodus 3:14–15.

- **There is a significant chronological gap between Moses and the earliest surviving inscriptions.** The earliest extant archaeological evidence containing the four Hebrew consonants dates centuries after the traditional lifetime of Moses, requiring careful historical interpretation.

- **The original pronunciation is not preserved in the surviving Hebrew manuscripts.** The earliest Hebrew manuscripts record consonants but not the original vowels, and the later Masoretic vowel points reflect a reading tradition rather than a documented original pronunciation.

- **Historical methodology requires distinguishing observation from inference.** Responsible historical research begins with what the evidence actually preserves before considering possible interpretations.

- **The original language of Moses' record cannot presently be established.** While the surviving account is preserved in Biblical Hebrew manuscripts, the available historical evidence does not identify the language or script Moses may have used if he recorded the revelation himself.

- **Because the original language cannot be established, neither can the original spelling or pronunciation of the designation in Exodus 3:14–15.** Any proposed reconstruction depends upon later manuscript traditions and scholarly interpretation rather than a surviving original document.

- **Careful scholarship values intellectual humility.** Where the evidence is silent, responsible historical inquiry acknowledges uncertainty rather than presenting assumptions as established fact.

Discussion Questions

Understanding the Evidence

- Why is it important to distinguish between **what an ancient manuscript says** and **what historians conclude from it**?
- What is the difference between **direct evidence** and **historical inference**? Can you identify examples of each from this lesson?
- Which archaeological discovery discussed in this lesson do you believe provides the strongest historical evidence? Why?

Manuscripts and Translation

- What role did the Greek Septuagint, the Latin Vulgate, and English translations play in transmitting the word **LORD**?
- Why do modern English Bibles print **LORD** instead of preserving the four Hebrew consonants?
- How did the Masoretic vowel-pointing system influence later readings of the Hebrew text?

Archaeological Evidence

- What do the Dead Sea Scrolls actually preserve concerning the divine designation?
- Why are the Ketef Hinnom Amulets, the Mesha Stele, the Lachish Letters, and the Elephantine Papyri historically significant, and what are their limitations?
- Why is archaeological context important when interpreting inscriptions?

Historical Methodology

Why is the chronological gap between Moses and the earliest surviving inscriptions significant for historical research?

Why should historians avoid treating assumptions as established facts?

What does it mean to say that **absence of evidence is not necessarily evidence of absence**? How does that principle apply to this lesson?

Linguistic Considerations

Why is it difficult to determine the original language or script Moses may have used?

How does uncertainty about the original language affect attempts to determine the original spelling or pronunciation of the designation in Exodus 3:14–15?

What kinds of evidence would historians need to discover in order to strengthen claims about the original linguistic form of the Exodus revelation?

Personal Reflection

What idea or piece of evidence from this lesson challenged your previous understanding the most?

How has this lesson changed—or reinforced—your approach to reading biblical translations?

Why is intellectual honesty important when studying ancient history and sacred texts?

What questions remain unanswered after completing this lesson?

As you continue this course, what evidence or historical discoveries are you most interested in exploring further?